DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 113 935 FL 007 154

AUTHOR Kalmar, Rosalyn Rudolph
TITLE The Culver City Schools' Spanish Immersion Program: Low Cost - High Yield. CATESOL Occasional Papers, No. 2.
INSTITUTION California Association of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages.
PUB DATE 75
NOTE 5p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 HC-$1.58 Plus Postage
DESCRIPTORS *Bilingual Education; Bilingual Schools; *Bilingual Teachers; Cost Effectiveness; Elementary Education; *Elementary School Curriculum; Language Instruction; Program Costs; Program Descriptions; *Program Effectiveness; Program Evaluation; Reading Instruction; Second Language Learning; *Spanish; Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS *California (Culver City); *Immersion Programs

ABSTRACT

The Culver City (Calif.) Schools' Spanish Immersion Program (SIP) offers an innovative and highly successful approach to the development of proficiency in a foreign language in the elementary grades. This approach differs from most bilingual programs in that for the first two years the students are completely immersed in Spanish. When the students reach second grade, an hour a day of English instruction is added to the program. Additional instruction in English is added each year until, by sixth grade, instruction time in the two languages will be approximately equal. Begun in 1971, the program is aimed primarily at the native English-speaking child, although a few Spanish-speaking children are also involved. The program has been inexpensive to operate because no extra staff has been required. The regular elementary program is taught by teachers who are themselves bilingual. They just happen to be teaching in Spanish, enabling the students to absorb the language in a way that is natural, almost casual. Test scores indicate that students also do as well as or better than the students in the regular English-speaking classrooms in their mastery of basic skills. (Author)

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THE CULVER CITY SCHOOLS' SPANISH IMMERSION PROGRAM: LOW COST - HIGH YIELD

Rosalyn Rudolph Kalmar
Bev[illegible]ills High School

The Culver City Unified School District's Spanish Immersion Program (SIP) at El Marino School is one of the most exciting, innovative, and successful developments taking place today in the public elementary schools.

This program has been startlingly effective in giving English-speaking students native-like proficiency in Spanish, with no loss in their ability to use English.

Third-grade students who entered the program four years ago in the kindergarten group can now converse freely in Spanish. Many current second graders are also quite fluent. This achievement is due largely to the unique monolingual approach to Spanish used in the program, according to Irma Noriega Wright, one of the instructors.

In contrast to similar programs, which have attempted to be bilingual from the start, the teachers in the Spanish Immersion Program speak only Spanish with the children during kindergarten and first grade, and the children respond in Spanish. The teachers treat the students exactly as if they were native speakers of Spanish. No memorization or rote drills are used. As one student put it during a television interview, "We're not studying Spanish; we're learning things in Spanish."

By this natural, seemingly casual approach, the students acquire a second language in almost the same way as they did their native language. They are surrounded by the sounds of the language; they listen, they understand, they speak.

And the children love it. To them, learning a new language is an exciting adventure--not the chore it often becomes when approached as a formal study.

Now in its fourth year, the program presently involves four grades (kindergarten through grade 3) and three bilingual teachers working in a team situation. The District plans to add one grade per year until the program covers kindergarten through grade 6.

Through the school's science and physical education instructors, the children in the Spanish Immersion Program begin receiving some of their instruction in English during the first grade. English reading is added during the second grade, taught by the teachers in the Immersion Program. It is planned that the number of subjects taught in English will be increased each year until grade 6, at which time English and Spanish will be used in equal amounts.

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For such an outstanding and innovative program, one might assume that large amounts of money would be needed. In fact, this is not the case. There has been no additional money needed to pay special instructors. It was necessary merely to find qualified elementary teachers who were proficient in both Spanish and English. The only expense to the District has been a small cash outlay for textbooks and supplemental materials in Spanish.

Students benefit from being in the Immersion Program in several ways. The primary one, of course, is that they acquire a ssecond language--and that they do so in a way that is natural and almost effortless. Any person who has struggled through vocabulary lists, verb conjugations, and "conversation" exercises while studying a foreign language can only envy the ease and unself-conscious way in which these youngsters approach Spanish.

In addition to the acquisition of a second language, the students also develop a broad understanding and appreciation of a culture other than their native one. As Dr. Julian Nava, Los Angeles City Schools Board of Education member, has stated, "The disadvantaged child of the future will be the one who knows only one language and one culture."

Another apparent advantage to Immersion students is that they are first taught to read in Spanish, which is a phonetic language. For example, in Spanish the vowel "O" <u>always</u> has the sound of "O"--as in the word "mono" (monkey). Contrast this with the variety of sounds "O" makes in the following English sentence: "Joe and Ron should not do this work now." Thus, it is very easy to learn to read it, according to Sra. Wright. After developing basic reading skills in Spanish, which follows a simple and sonsistent written code, the students approach the inconsistencies of written English with confidence when it is introduced formally in the second grade. In fact, many of the students have already acquired the ability to read English before they reach the second grade. As the former principal, Vera Jashni, pointed out at a parents' meeting, "You can't <u>keep</u> them from learning to read!"

For native speakers of Spanish, who may enter the program when they are first graders, the benefits can sometimes be dramatic. One boy had been classified as a "slow learner" prior to entering the program. After a year he was in the top reading group in both Spanish and English. Another student who had been declared "hopeless" by her former reading teacher is now making steady progress and has developed a positive attitude toward school. Perhaps the realization that their native language and culture are highly valued motivates such students to succeed. Culver City can pride itself on having a good start toward meeting the Supreme Court's recent requirement that students whose native language is not English must have programs designed to meet their needs.

Will there be any detriment to Spanish Immersion students in their ability to use English? Apparently not, according to Dr. Andrew Cohen of the UCLA English Department. Dr. Cohen, who has been assisting the District in evaluating the program, states that on tests given to the Immersion Program students and to control groups since 1971, the children in the Immersion Program have done as well as or better than those in the regular program.

On the Cooperative Primary Test of Mathematics given to the first-grade students in May 1973, for example, the students in the Immersion Program scored at the 1.9 grade level while those in the conventional program scored at the 1.8 level. When the test was given the following year, second graders in the regular program scored at the 2.8 level while these same Immersion students were at the 3.3 grade level--half a year ahead of those in the regular program. It is interesting to note that a similar acceleration in math skills was observed in a French immersion program in St. Lambert, Canada. Obviously, the SIP students are not "falling behind" in their regular work--a concern sometimes expressed by people not involved in the program. Dr. Cohen further reports that on the Inter-American Test of Reading in Spanish, these same Immersion second graders performed nearly as well as a comparison group of students in Ecuador.

The test results are impressive, but the best way to really understand the excellence of this program is to see it in action.

When a visitor enters a SIP classroom, he or she knows immediately that something very exciting and stimulating is happening. The rooms are brightly adorned from floor to ceiling with art work, Spanish posters, flags, books, and student projects. All sections are humming with activity.

The kindergarten-grade 1 teacher, Sra. Wright, is drilling a group of students on the letters and sounds of the alphabet. She uses flash cards showing the letters of the alphabet and the picture of an object that starts with each letter. S goes s-s-s-s-s and stands for "serpiente." A second-grade student directs a game of picture bingo for another kindergarten group--saying the words in Spanish, of course. A parent volunteer brings in a stack of dittoed work sheets which she has just prepared.

In the adjoining room, another teacher, Susan Mathis, is working with a first-grade group learning that if you have 3 beans and add 4 more, then you have 7 beans--except, of course, that it's "7 frijoles." (They're using real beans, too; each student has some to work with.) Three parents sit quietly in the corner on an observation visit, which the teachers encourage.

It is English reading time in the room of the grade 2-3 teacher, Carmen Jarel. The students are divided into six small groups so that each child can progress at his own rate. A parent aide assists with one group doing oral reading. The students read clearly and without hesitation. To encourage additional reading, Sra. Jarel is covering a wall with paper "bricks" inscribed with the name of a book and the student who has read it.

One of the prime reasons for the success of the Spanish Immersion Program is the feeling of mutual respect that exists between the teachers and the parents in the program. Many parents volunteer their services as classroom aides; they have also held fund-raising events to buy classroom materials. Well-attended evening meetings keep the parents informed about the program and serve to emphasize that parents are valued partners in the educational process.

An early parent-staff meeting this year provided many parent testimonials. The mother of a second grader described how her child had served as an interpreter for the Spanish-speaking mother of a classmate whom they wanted to invite to a birthday party.

Another mother said she felt sorry for her sister, whose children are in a regular elementary program and are already bored with school. "My only problem," the SIP mother stated, "is trying to keep my children home from school when they are ill. They don't want to miss anything."

The parents have frequently expressed hope that this superb program would receive wide exposure so that other districts might be inspired to set up their own immersion programs in Spanish or other foreign languages.

It is the intent of this article to bring deserved public recognition to this outstanding program and to suggest that interested teachers, administrators, and parents contact the school for further information if they are interested in setting up similar programs. Letters may be addressed to Mr. Eugene Ziff, Principal, El Marino School, 11450 Port Road, Culver City, California.